

An Outburst of the Soul

Reflections on Art in the Life & Work of Henry Miller.

Karl Orend

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HENRY MILLER FESTIVAL
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Exhibition - Paintings by Henry Miller



« THE DEVIL WRITES BUT THE ANGEL PAINTS. »
HENRY MILLER

SPECIAL EVENING MAY 7 AT 7PM - DONATION APPRECIATED
Celebration of Henry Miller's life : Talks, Film, Concert

27 rue Keller, Paris 11e mer/sam, 13h - 19h, mar & dim 16h - 19h

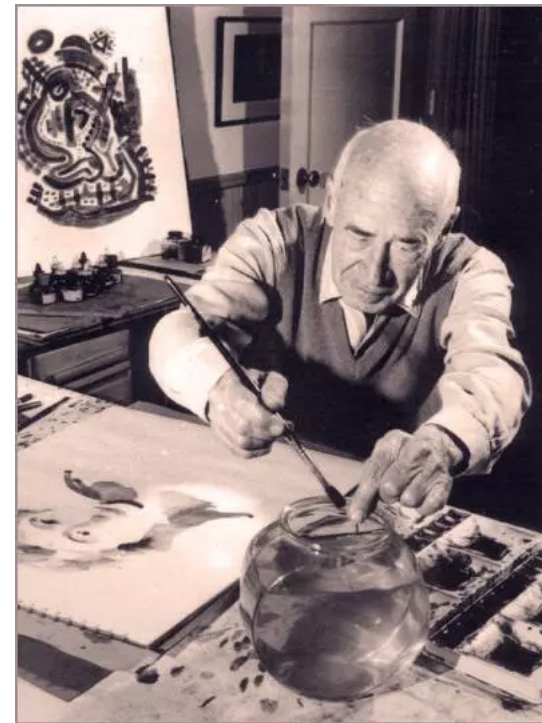




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This chapbook is dedicated to Mary Duncan and to Brenda Venus with gratitude, in friendship.



“Once art is really accepted it will cease to be. It is only a substitute, a symbol language, for something that can be seized directly. But for that to become possible man must become thoroughly religious, not a believer, but a prime mover, a god in fact and deed.”

Henry Miller on Writing.

“The greatest joy, the greatest triumph, in art, comes at the moment when, realizing to the fullest your grip over the medium, you deliberately sacrifice it in the hope of discovering a vital hidden truth within you.”

Sextet.

“So many French writers, I discovered, were also painters, musicians, actors, ambassadors, mathematicians. Whatever they did on the side was of interest to friends and public alike. They were artists. And when one is an artist, all media open up. No one medium is sufficient to express the wealth of feeling which burdens the soul of an artist.”

To Paint is to Love Again.

“Always, when there is a lull in the writing, color asserts itself!”

Semblance of a Devoted Past

“In between painting we drank wine and talked about it. Underneath the animal spirits lurked always; the greater preoccupation for Miller — for he took painting seriously and was very conscious that through it his second self, so to speak, was quietly evolving itself in the benign shadow of Élie Faure.”

Lawrence Durrell “Foreword” to The Paintings of Henry Miller.

Introduction

Henry Miller was a painter of watercolors and gouaches for over fifty years. From the date of his first watercolor show at June Mansfield’s Roman Tavern (on Perry Street, Manhattan, in 1928), there have been nearly eighty exhibitions of Miller’s artworks internationally – in galleries, bookstores, museums and libraries, ranging from Washington D.C., Carbondale (Southern Illinois) and Westwood (Los Angeles) to Hamburg, Jerusalem, Paris, Uppsala, Perigeux, Tel Aviv and Tokyo.ⁱ His paintings have also been exhibited in several major universities — including Harvard, Yale, and The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin (where Miller’s signature is etched into the glass façade). Three institutions have provided access to continuing displays of Henry Miller watercolors, lithographs and prints – Katherine Winslow’s “M: The Gallery for Henry Miller” (Chicago, 1950s), Gary Koeppel’s The Coast Gallery at Big Sur and The Henry Miller Museum of Art at Omachi City in Nogano, Japan (opened in 1996, but now closed). Capra Press publisher, Noel Young, estimated Miller to have completed some 2,000 paintings by the time of his death. This figure is a minimum, with hundreds of paintings likely in private collections, untraced, unidentified, not mentioned in books or catalogues, or destroyed. It is known that Miller sometimes painted several watercolors in one day — many of which he simply gave away or bartered for his daily needs, especially during his time at The Green House in Beverley Glen and his early Big Sur years. Miller’s active life as a painter spanned some fifty-two years. Even at the rate of one painting a week he would have completed some 2,640 works. Miller, himself, estimated that he had done over 3,000 watercolors by

1972.ⁱⁱ At most, only some 20% of his paintings have ever appeared in book form. Henry Miller was a compulsive painter – just as he was a compulsive writer. He even painted watercolors onto many of his letters and into his notebooks, and into hand-made books for his friends.

Henry Miller won the Jerusalem International Art Prize. Both during and after his lifetime, there have also been many books that celebrated his paintings. This is a significant achievement for a man who claimed he was merely an amateur painter, without any great talent, daubing simply for recreation. It should be borne in mind that Miller was, on many occasions, similarly self-deprecating about his writing. He told several of his friends, ranging from Judson Crews and Brassai to Georges Belmont (the latter two in published interviews) that he frequently considered himself a failure as a writer. While Miller was not a major artist on the scale of some of his friends, such as Ossip Zadkine or Fernand Léger, he was at least as fine a painter as many of those professional artists he admired and wrote about. The popularity of his artwork is not simply attributable to his celebrity status as a banned writer. Miller's paintings are popular and historically significant. Private buyers and institutions avidly collect them on five continents. They have done so for decades.

One factor to consider when noting that Henry Miller belittled his abilities as a painter is that he befriended some of the great artists of the twentieth century. His first Parisian friend was the world-renowned sculptor/painter Ossip Zadkine, whom June Mansfield had met in 1927 and who Miller came to know the following year. Upon his arrival in Paris to start a new life, in March 1930, Henry Miller immediately set out to see Zadkine (for whom June had briefly

acted as a New York agent) at his atelier on the rue d'Assas, next to the Luxembourg Gardens. Later, Henry Miller befriended numerous painters and art collectors of varying degrees of fame. These included: André Breton, Benjamin Bufano, Ghika, Ephraïm Doner, Jean Hélion, Hilaire Hiler, Fred Kann, Pierre Matisse, Frank Mechau, Knud Merrild, John Nichols, Gregory Michonze, Chana Orloff, Pavia, Valentine Prax, Abe Rattner, Man Ray, Hans Reichel, Betty Ryan, Bezalel Schatz, Leo Stein, Irving Stettner, Tihanyi, Vlaminck and Jean Varda. Amongst his most famous artist friends and acquaintances were: Brassai, Alexander Calder, Oscar Kokoschka, Fernand Léger, Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, George Grosz, Pablo Picasso, Marino Marini (who sculpted Miller), Chaim Soutine (who also lived at 18 villa Seurat) and Max Ernst (who was inspired by Miller to create the major sculpture "Capricorn"). In the company of some of the men who had changed the face of modern art, Henry Miller was understandably ill at ease hearing himself praised too highly. Painting was, after all, his secondary field of creative expression. Miller enjoyed the close company of artists all his life. His closest boyhood friend, of those who remained a friend for life, was an artist – Emil Schnellock. His dearest friend in Big Sur was also a painter – Emil White. Many of his Big Sur and Paris friends were painters and sculptors. Henry's literary ally, Lawrence Durrell, was also a painter, under the name Oscar Efps. One of Miller's four named core influences on his life's work, Élie Faure, was the legendary art historian, whose subject was painting, sculpture and art in all its forms.

Henry Miller wrote extensively on art and artists all his life. These ranged from his observations on painters and painting techniques in letters to Emil Schnellock (some collected in *Semblance of a Devoted Past*) to his essays on individual artists, such as: Hans Reichel ("The

Cosmological Eye”), Benjamin Bufano (“Bufano, The Man of Hard Materials”), Beauford Delaney (“The Amazing & Invariable Beauford Delaney”) Jean Varda (“Varda: The Master Builder”), Knud Merrill (“Knud Merrill: A Holiday in Paint”) and Abe Rattner (“A Bodhisattva Artist”). Henry Miller also wrote dozens of book prefaces, contributions to catalogues, short articles and minor essays on painters and art. He explored his own painting technique in *Black Spring* — and wrote general essays on painting as a form (collected in Noel Young’s *The Paintings of Henry Miller, with Collected Essays on the Art of Watercolor* Chronicle Books, San Francisco 1973). Henry Miller sometimes even provided texts to accompany paintings by artists, such as his collaboration entitled *Greece*, with Anne Poor. *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* was originally written expressly to accompany paintings by Fernand Léger. At times, Miller even illustrated his own work (as in the case of *Insomnia or the Devil at Large*) or sought out the sketches, paintings, or photographs of artists to accompany his texts. Miller had hoped that either George Grosz or Brassai would illustrate *Tropic of Cancer*, just as he later intended that Abe Rattner would illustrate *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* — in both cases the prohibitive cost meant the collaborations never materialized.

All of Henry Miller’s major works contain direct or indirect references to art — such as his reflections on Henri Matisse in *Tropic of Cancer* and the numerous allusions to paintings in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*.ⁱⁱⁱ In *Orchestrating Reality: Notes on Musical Form in the Writings of Anaïs Nin & Henry Miller* (Alyscamps Press 2007) I drew attention to the importance of music as a catalyst for the writing styles of both Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin. The links between these two writers are primarily to be found in their fascination with musical form, dance, and cinema. In the case of Miller and Lawrence Durrell,

it can be argued that their literary allegiance is anchored in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, French literature and in music, but also (much more than in the case of Nin) in art and visual imagery derived from the world of religious symbol, painting and sculpture.^{iv} Lawrence Durrell acknowledged that his first wife, the painter Nancy Meyers, aided him greatly with his writing by improving his powers of visual observation and attention to detail. The impact of this training is clearly seen in his later novels and travelogues, such as in the opening pages of *The Alexandria Quartet*. Henry Miller similarly learned a great deal about observation, portraiture and writing style from his interaction with the graphic arts and artists, both in person and through their creations. *Tropic of Cancer* was, after all, the work of a man who came to be known as “The George Grosz of literature.”

In order to fully appreciate his work, one must realize that for Henry Miller the written word was inseparable from rhythm, music and the spoken word (as it was for Élie Faure, Louis Ferdinand Céline, Jack Kerouac, or Langston Hughes), and from visual imagery (as it was for Oswald Spengler, and Marcel Proust); all of whom greatly influenced him.^v Henry Miller’s mature writing style is based in musical form and sequences of visual images (such as seen by a composer, painter, film or theater director) transmuted into writing. He takes the techniques of the visual and dramatic arts (such as cinema, opera, and theater) and combines them with his fascination with verbal communication, the oral tradition of the streets, and popular theater (burlesque, vaudeville, Grand Guignol). This is combined with his passion for literary and religious symbolism to form a text that is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional — even though it is usually (tragically) misread as literary realism, or straightforward autobiographical narrative. The key word in understanding Henry Miller’s *oeuvre* is “flow,” — whether it is the torrential flow of words and images in his prose, the flow of

compassion and yearning for love (as love and as God) in his spiritual works, or the flow of washes in his watercolors and gouaches. Henry Miller loved “everything that flows,” precisely because he associated “flow” with the life force itself, and thus with divinity and *amour*. This explains his predilection for watercolor and gouache and his unwillingness to explore oil painting, collage, and sculpture.

Henry Miller attempted to create, in his major books, a literary equivalent to Richard Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Total Artwork) or Adrian Henri’s “Total Art,” in which all the senses subconsciously combine to produce a deeply religious and emotional experience. Only by revisiting his texts repeatedly can the nuances of intellectual and symbolic meaning that Miller embeds in his texts be unraveled. The conflict between a superficial and deeper reading of Miller’s books has been a particular problem for Anglophone readers – largely because the effects of Puritanism and political correctness have curtailed critics’ understanding of, or sympathy for, sexual and violent symbolism (associated with Catholicism, Pagan and Oriental religions and the abuse of women). In cultures where Protestant Christian influences on literary and artistic culture are minimalized, such as France, India and Japan, Miller is accepted as a major writer. This is hardly surprising, since Miller’s main artistic influences (like his literary and religious ideas) were European, Indian, and Japanese – not American.

Henry Miller created, in his auto-romances, a form of virtual reality or total immersion, in which one becomes carried away in the flow of a narrative of the “life” and adventures of “Henry Miller” – most of which are symbolic, and not autobiography. This technique was, in

part, derived from Walt Whitman, Frank Harris, Marcel Proust and Louis Ferdinand Céline. Miller developed his own fictional technique of Spiral Form (based in Theosophy and Hindu/Buddhist ideas), and enhanced it by his reading of Proust, whose major work, like Miller’s, shifts back and forth in time, to create an illusion of spiraling flow. Like Proust, Miller blurred the line between the narrator of his books and the author himself — to the point that inattentive readers cannot distinguish between them. Critics of Miller’s writing would do well to take note of Proust’s *Contre Saint-Beuve*, and to explore his belief (shared with Miller) that biography was not the key to understanding a book — in fact, the path to understanding a book (and doubtless the life of its writer) leads through the fictional text.

Sadly, for Miller, as Proust wrote in the “Overture” to *Remembrance of Things Past*:

“Even in the most insignificant details of our daily life, none of us can be said to constitute a material whole, which is identical for everyone, and need only be turned up like a page in an account book or the record of a will; our social personality is created by the thoughts of other people. Even the simple act, which we describe as ‘seeing someone we know’, is, to some extent, an intellectual process. We pack the physical outline of the creature we see with all the ideas we have already formed about him, and in the complete picture of him which we compose in our minds those ideas certainly have the principal place.”^{vi}

The social and critical image of Henry Miller and his abilities as a writer and painter are largely derived from preconceived notions about his personality. They are also skewed by the inability of critics

to understand his writing techniques and to differentiate between Miller the man and Miller the auto-hero of the novels. To take Miller literally in his accounts of “his” (sic) life is as pointless as to take Proust as being accurately depicted in accounts of the Narrator of *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Henry Miller, like Richard Wagner before him, created a fusion of mythology, theater, art, literature, religion, and music in his major works. Miller added the ingredients of street life, everyday language, sexuality, social concerns, and popular culture to bring this conceit roaring into the twentieth century. His aim was, in part, to assault the elitism of the literary canon. He sought (like Céline) to bridge the gap between literature and the man in the street. Thereby, he could reconcile the Janus-faced conflict he felt within himself – between the simple Brooklyn boy of the streets and the rabid logomaniac, intellectual and propagandist. Henry Miller rendered back to everyday people a direct involvement in literature – such as had been the norm for centuries, at venues, and in texts, such as William Shakespeare’s Globe Theater, the plays of Molière, works of Rabelais and William Morris’ Kelmscott. The separation of everyday life and commonplace thoughts from the written word was a direct result of religious involvement in censorship and controlling access to the written word. Since Miller was not a Christian, he would have none of it. He believed that what Christians tended to call “morality” was its own form of insidious immorality and oppression.^{vii}

Origins

Henry Miller was uncertain when his passion for art began. He could, however, identify several key encounters, episodes, paintings, artists and writings by artists and art historians that had left a lifelong impression on his personality and his writing. As Miller wrote, in his remembrances of Heinrich Miller’s encounters with Jean Kronski and John Imhoff, his own father was intensely interested in both art and theater – passions he, unwittingly, passed on to his son.^{viii} Heinrich had as customers at his tailor shop not only great actors, like John Barrymore, and writers, like Frank Harris, but also major artists, such as Boardman Robinson, and art critics such as Walter Pach (translator of Élie Faure), all of whom Henry knew personally.

The first artist that Henry Miller knew was John Imhoff, father of his boyhood friends Tony and Joey, whom the Miller family frequently visited in Glendale. Imhoff (a German immigrant) was both a watercolorist and a maker of stained-glass windows for local churches. On several occasions, Miller described watching John Imhoff paint late at night — and of his allowing Henry to read amongst his extensive library of art books.^{ix} Early on, from before he was ten, Henry Miller thus came to associate painting with religious experience:

“Usually the father (John Imhoff) retired early. He did not go to sleep immediately. He made watercolors by the light of a student lamp. We had to pass through his room (on tiptoe) to go to our bedroom. It always gave me a Holy feeling to see Mr. Imhoff bent over a pad of

paper with a brush or two in his hand. He seemed not to be aware of our presence.”

The Book of Friends p.41.

Even in 1960, the now famous Henry Miller still owned the first watercolor John Imhoff had given his parents, when Henry was seven or eight:

“I still marvel, each time I look at it, that the human hand could have accomplished such wonders. It must have been done under a magnifying glass with a fine brush.”^x

The first artist of his own age Henry Miller knew was Emil Schnellock, whom he knew at PS85 from the age of ten. Schnellock frequently drew on the classroom blackboard, and, after he and Henry lost touch for some years, they met again while Henry was working at his father’s tailor shop. They became close friends. Much of their interaction during the 1920s and 1930s was based in their discussions of art. Schnellock had studied art briefly in Paris. He was forced to abandon his life as a painter to become a commercial artist, to support his parents and brother and sister. Yet Emil’s fascination with art was life-long:

“He never became a great artist, but he was a great lover of art. We spent whole nights together looking at books on art, studying reproductions, discussing styles, periods, and techniques. It was a very important period in my life.”
(*My Life & Times* p.64).

Henry Miller asserted that it was Emil Schnellock who:

“Provided such a wonderful background for me - who gave me the feeling and reverence for art.”

“Thanks to him I became a devoted lover of art. As a disciple I was always ready to sit at his feet and listen to him discourse on the masters. And he could do it well! Long before I dreamed of taking brush in hand we talked paint, painting, painters, dug up precious albums to show to one another, visited galleries and museums, made each other drunk with our enthusiasm, Often, we passed the whole night poring over the works of the artists we admired or revered. It was a golden period, this interim of adoration. I can still see myself, standing as it were in the vestibule of art with hat in hand.”^{xi}

(*To Paint is to Love Again* p.10.)

“We spent whole nights — like he would come at 8 o’clock and it would last till 2 o’clock or 3 o’clock in the morning. He would bring his art books... and we would look at them, reverently look at and discuss their work.” (*This is Henry, Henry Miller from Brooklyn* p. 35)

Miller’s art teacher at PS85, unwittingly and paradoxically, gave another impetus to him becoming an artist. He was considered, by his teacher, totally unable to draw or make things out of plaster or clay:

“My ineptitude was so flagrant that I was soon informed not to bother attending class.” (*To Paint is to Love Again* p.7)

Later, Henry Miller would say that this humiliation served him in good stead. It was a fundamental part of his character that when he was told he was incapable of doing something, he frequently set about trying to prove his critic wrong in the most determined way. This was true both for writing and painting. Miller's determination to succeed and his bitterness at others considering him a failure (and the rage it engendered) was an important life-long driving force behind his achievements.

During his years at the tailor shop, Henry Miller frequently met Walter Pach, who, along with his brothers, was a regular client. Pach was a famous art critic and translator of Élie Faure, whom Miller listed, along with Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Spengler as one of the four most important influences on his life's work. After he arrived in Paris, in 1930, Miller would often loiter on the boulevard Saint Germain across the street from Faure's apartment, too shy and ashamed of his poverty and failure to make a name, to ring the bell.^{xii} In 1932, Pach befriended Anaïs Nin and visited her in Louveciennes — where he told her that he remembered Henry well from New York. Henry, still bitter about his failure to make it in Paris, could not bear to see such a successful published writer in the flesh. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s the works of Élie Faure, in Pach's translation, were a major influence on Miller writing. They were also profoundly influential on Louis Ferdinand Céline.

The tailor shop years provided an important influence on Henry Miller's love of art. Each day, he would take the subway from Brooklyn to Manhattan. Henry exited the train at Delancey Street. He walked from there to Fifth Avenue and 31st Street, where the shop

was located. Along this route, at the corner of 27th or 28th Street and Fifth Avenue, there was an art shop:

“...which I never passed without stopping to examine the prints in the show window. One day it would be Cimbuë that fascinated me, the next Giotto or Uccello; each week, it seemed, I found a new idol to worship: the Japanese above all — Hokusai, Utamaro, Hiroshige, and then Renoir, Whistler, Monet, van Gogh, Botticelli, Marc Chagall, Holbein, Utrillo, Léon Bakst, Memling, Seurat, Modigliani, Rousseau, Breughel, Bosch, van Eyck, Paul Klee, Kandinsky, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Now and then I bought a print and hung it in some conspicuous place...I also wrote long letters to my cronies about my discovery of this genius or that.”

(To Paint is to Love Again pp.8-10)

There are numerous clues in his books to Henry Miller's fascination with art in the fifteen years before he finally took up a brush and tried to paint (probably in 1927, in his mid-thirties). Henry frequently described how at 91 Remsen Street, where he lived with June Mansfield, and tried to first establish himself as a writer after quitting Western Union in 1924, he placed reproductions of artworks, notably Japanese prints from the “Floating World” style, on the walls by his writing desk for inspiration. These images of art, especially Japanese and Indian, together with some other religious works, would find their way into the essential imagery of his major books, such as *Tropic of Cancer*. In *Cancer* Miller links his literary purpose directly to painting:

“Up to the present, my idea in collaborating with myself has been to get off the gold standard of literature. My idea briefly has been to

present a resurrection of the emotions, to depict the conduct of a human being in the stratosphere of ideas, that is, in the grip of delirium. To *paint* a pre-Socratic being, a creature part goat, part Titan. In short, to erect a world based on the omphalos, not on an abstract idea nailed to a cross. Here and there you may have come across neglected statues, oases untapped, windmills overlooked by Cervantes, rivers that run uphill, women with five and six breasts ranged longitudinally along the torso.”

Writing to Paul Gauguin, Strindberg had once said:

« J'ai vu des arbres que ne retrouverait aucun botaniste, des animaux que Cuvier n'a jamais soupçonné et des hommes que vous seul avez pu créer. »^{xiii}

This explanation by Miller, to an attentive reader, reveals the profound influence of Faure. It also asserts the parallel between Miller and Céline in their obsession with delirium and emotion. In this passage Miller reveals that, just as he sublimated his love of music (he was once a piano teacher) and *composed* his books using musical form,^{xiv} so he also *Painted* with his words, as did another “failed artist,” Claude Simon. This passage from *Cancer* is particularly revealing about Miller’s literary technique. He shows that he intended (like Proust) to step outside of time and the established canon of contemporary writing (the gold standard). He intended to restore emotions, feelings, ideas, life, and delirium to writing. In other words, he is exiting the Puritan dominated literature of his time and tapping into the European catholic tradition of the Symbolist poets and their antecedents and successors in the Romance and Picaresque traditions. The use of “delirium” emphasizes the importance of mystical inspiration and freedom from intellect.^{xv} Miller intimates that

his characters will be part man, part beast and part god — thus unifying all animal life and divinity. The world Miller is trying to create is “pre-Socratic” and thus not anthropocentric, but rather cosmological, holistic and natural, dominated by ebb and flow and the life force — concerned with the nature of all creation and the link between all life and the divine spirit. This pre-Socratic time was the period of Greek thought that most closely resembled Miller’s beloved Oriental philosophy — with The Logos resembling Tao, and its originator, Heraclitus, echoing Buddhist ideas on transience. Miller, like Heraclitus, believed that everything living is in flux or flow and undergoes constant transformation (Heraclitus’ term, *panta rhei*). Heraclitus emphasized the duality inherent in all things — which, in turn, became an obsession of Proust and Miller’s writing (his notions of schizophrenia and Janus-faced man/fascination with Tao and yin/yang). Each thing also contains its opposite. Heraclitus noted that: “out of discord comes the fairest harmony.” These ideas and their partial adoption (via Hegel/Goethe) by Nietzsche and Spengler, influenced Miller, and several of his contemporaries, such as Carl Jung (notably in his adoption of enantiodromia). Miller shows that the world he is creating via his books is in direct rejection of the worldview based on Christ’s crucifixion (and Judaism). It is rather allied to notions of the omphalos of ancient Greece. This should not be confused with the antecedent of Creationism, or the “omphalos hypothesis,” derived from Philip Henry Gosse’s *Creation (Omphalos)*, which appeared in 1857 (two years before Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*) and which opposes evolutionary theory.^{xvi} Miller was not alone in his fascination with “omphalos.” The concept is a prime one for James Joyce in the “Telemachus” section of *Ulysses*, where it is specifically linked to a “new paganism,” such as Miller advocated.

Élie Faure in Miller's Development

Henry Miller first discovered the writings of Élie Faure, through his father's customer, Faure's translator, Walter Pach. The Pach brothers, who ran a famous photography studio in Manhattan, were all customers of Heinrich Miller. Walter Pach was, like Faure, interested in all forms of artistic expression. He used, for example, to supply Henry with free tickets to hear opera recitals at Carnegie Hall. Henry Miller later recalled that he read all of Faure's works in translation as they appeared during the 1920s. The first English volume of *The History of Art* appeared in 1921, which was at a period when Henry was married to concert pianist Béatrice Wickens, and had a daughter, Barbara, less than two years old. He was just starting his stint at Western Union and was already involved in long discussions of art with Emil Schnellock. Henry had spent many nights studying art books with Emil, years looking at prints in shop windows on his way to the tailor shop and building his own small collection of favorite reproductions.

When Henry Miller began to read the works of Élie Faure, he knew nothing about the author's life. Henry was, he later recalled, "too timid" to even mention to Walter Pach that he was reading *The History of Art* — just as, in 1930, after his arrival in Paris, Miller would walk up and down in front of Élie Faure's apartment block on the Boulevard St. Germain, for days on end, and be too scared to ring the bell and introduce himself. ("What could I have said to him,

except that I had a heart full of respect and admiration for him and his work?").^{xvii}

It was not the fact that Élie Faure had written a history of world art that was fundamentally important to Miller. Rather, he explained:

"I read him just as I would have listened to great music, for his strength and power and for the beauty and purity of his language."

The fact that Faure wrote on art was secondary. That does not mean that the impact of the subject matter was any less vital in Miller's education, or influential upon his work. Although Miller was familiar with some of the art of which Faure wrote, these volumes vastly expanded his intellectual horizons and, simultaneously, his understanding of what a writer could achieve in prose.

"Taking up Élie Faure again and re-reading what he wrote about them (the great artists), every time it sends me into raptures...and it is for that reason, of course, that I feel myself to be in a kind of intimate communion with this work — why I believe it will always remain a fresh source of inspiration to me."

Henry Miller was inspired by Faure's subject matter, the musicality and religious undercurrent of his prose, and by his catholic and holistic approach to art and culture. One element of Faure's work that Miller singled out as vitally important was his "extraordinary understanding of the importance and relevance of art in everyday life."

Henry Miller stated that Élie Faure possessed:

“A sort of supernatural visionary gift which allowed him to penetrate deep into the hearts and minds of people, places, historical epochs, and landscapes. He had, above all, a kind of religious fervor for the creative spirit. Like out own Walt Whitman, his vision was truly cosmological.”

When reading Faure’s *History of Art*, Miller felt closest to the author in his descriptions of Ancient and Prehistoric Art.

“Often I used, almost stole or plagiarized, those long rhapsodic passages, the oratorical developments in his style, in order to polish and bolster up my own writing.”

This was natural, given Miller’s alienation from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Even decades later, Miller would reread Faure when he required inspiration for his own books. Henry Miller also was deeply impressed by the fact that Faure was a medical practitioner and, like Louis-Ferdinand Céline, had written his books after days spent tending the sick. Faure was also a teacher, and political activist.

“Let us not forget, in passing, that these sublime pages were written by a local doctor, whose days and nights were often interrupted by stressful duties, numerous demands on his time, annoying and exhausting situations.”

Henry Miller wondered if, when suddenly called to see a patient at night, Élie Faure had made notes for his masterpiece on his shirt cuffs. He was convinced that for Faure art was not a hobby, but rather as integral to his life as breathing — precisely because Faure was himself a man that lived culture and art every minute of every day, being in reality a great artist himself. Reading *The History of Art*, had been, for Miller “an awakening...a revelation.” This series of books had been a catalyst for his appreciation of the “magic” of art.

Henry Miller was not simply impressed by the majesty of great works of art described, but rather Élie Faure’s sense of reverence — a religious and mystical experience was provoked by reading his books or seeing an artwork through his eyes. It demanded a response. Faure was a great fecundator. Henry Miller responded, as did others like Céline and Louis Stettner — not only by subsequently writing about art and artists in his books, but also by using the techniques of artistic composition, and artistic/religious motifs discovered in paintings and sculpture, to enhance his own use of symbolism and to balance the varied tones of his prose compositions. In Henry Miller’s mind, Élie Faure’s writing was intimately linked to music and transposition. Henry would, under his influence, use musical form to construct his major novels. Élie Faure thereby contributed to one of the cornerstones of Henry Miller’s writing style.

Élie Faure taught Henry Miller that all great art was an interaction between artist, work of art and spectator. Miller, thereafter, sought to make his books a catalyst for interaction between writer and reader, on the most vital personal and spiritual level. This helped bring about a gradual change in Miller’s writing style, from his early imitations of

traditional literary form and third person narratives to a radical new voice based in the first person and everyday speech.^{xviii} Céline derived his own form of written expression from his obsession with Faure's work. Without response, Miller believed, an artwork or a book could not live, or be on the side of life. Thus, a current of flow back and forth between writer and reader or artist and observer must be established. Just as Faure made art seem vital and essential to everyday life, so Miller tried to root his books in the everyday and commonplace and yet to give them a universal religious and social dimension.

Henry Miller was obsessed by the idea, which Faure had mooted, that art did not derive from religion, as most people imagined, but that religion had been born out of art. Taken to its logical development, this idea affirmed Miller's belief that man himself was divine. Art was the outcome of a failure to live up to the divinity within each of us. It was an expression of longing and for communion, for unification with all creation, and thus the divine spirit. This "reaching out" was expressed by the flow of words and images between the artist, who creates (and therefore acts in a god-like manner) and the non-artist, who needs the artist/writer as an intermediary to recognize the divine spirit, which he has lost sight of because of the demands and pressures of civilization. One of the most neglected aspects of Henry Miller's faith in a deity is that he believed that what we call "God" did not *create* the world. Rather He simply put *order* into what *already existed*. Henry Miller thereby linked, inextricably, the nature of God and the role of artist/writer.

Henry Miller is well known for his rejection of traditional education. He did not see Élie Faure's books as being pedagogical. He did not

even see them as primarily about gaining knowledge and facts about world art. Miller perceived them instead as texts that had the ability to affect readers spiritually and to awaken their perceptions, and to encourage receptivity to art, the universal, and the divine.

Miller believed:

"That which we need most of all is to be sensitive to the presence of art — to recognize its presence at every step, in every state of being — and most of all to realize that life itself is a form of great art, and that the supreme art is the art of living. The tragedy of our times is that we know or seem to know how to do so many things, but that we make so little use of our knowledge and capabilities. For a long time now, the artist has no longer been a source of joy and inspiration for everyday people. He has become a sort of sacred monster — an outsider, separate, against the grain, *en marge* — a creator whose creations are devoid of meaning to the general population."

Miller knew that one of the major problems in modern society is that art and literature have become divorced from everyday life. Within the artisan culture of pre-industrial societies this had not been true. Shakespeare wrote for the everyday man, not for intellectuals. Now he is the preserve of the educated. The same is true for Chaucer, Rabelais, Rostand and so many great writers. Art and literature were once the common domain of all, even if much of the population was illiterate. Peasants in the Middle Ages could read the sculptural patterns of a cathedral, even if they could not read a book. The story of Abelard and Heloise was recounted in the streets of Paris, and Abelard's poems recited to crowds, even in their lifetimes. Henry Miller's contemporaries, when he began to be published, those

considered great writers, were usually those who were the most erudite or the most obscure — such as James Joyce in *Ulysses* and Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, or Ezra Pound in the *Cantos*. Visitors to a gallery cannot necessarily understand why Mark Rothko would be paid tens of thousands of dollars for colored rectangles, or Tracey Ermin be lauded as a great artist for displaying her unmade bed together with used condoms and tampons. This seems to many people to be a case of insulting and alienating the audience by rubbing their noses in the great wealth that can be accumulated simply by doing something anyone could do if they had enough *chutzpah* and no sense of self-respect.

Henry Miller attempted to fight against the exclusivity of art and literature because he grew up surrounded by working class people and feeling like an outsider from the élite. Like D.H. Lawrence, he emerged from among the lower middle classes, who did not prioritize university education. It was assumed Henry would become a tailor or company manager, just as it was assumed that, at best, Lawrence would become a local schoolteacher. Both men were, to a large degree, autodidacts. Henry Miller was a rarity in his era — a writer who did not complete a college degree or have family money to help support him while he wrote (though he only became successful once he had a patron in the form of Anaïs Nin). Although Miller's work is multi-dimensional, it can still simply be read by the man in the street and enjoyed as a story. His books use the language of everyday, which was a radical choice in both French and American literature of the day. In America it had never previously been done. In France, a major author had not done it for decades, until Céline arrived on the scene in 1932. In the earlier, non-Puritan tradition, of writers such as Shakespeare and Rabelais, this use of the everyday had been the norm. Miller attempted, like Céline, to restore life to art and the

language of the everyday man to literature. Their work is anti-elitist and anti-establishment, as well as being anti-Christian-morality. Their writing is amoral. It is not immoral, as their critics would have us believe. Henry Miller was profoundly influenced by Faure's intellectual stance in devising his own unique voice.

In the modern age Henry Miller believed that creativity had come to serve the purposes of death and destruction, rather than life. Evidence of human creativity and invention is everywhere — from the space shuttle to the atomic bomb and from the Internet to electric cars, drones, and cellphones. The spiritual dimension, sense of awe and respect, which had been ever present in past ages, is now largely absent. Creativity and a form of perverse beauty can be found even in those objects created to cause destruction or to encourage people to piss away their lives on meaningless and unfulfilling pursuits. The dream job of many young people is Internet Influencer, in tax-free Dubai. Millions of people follow these accounts daily, worldwide. Yet, this use of creativity does nothing to exalt or glorify life. Miller coined the phrase “admirative terror” to describe common reactions to many of modern man's inventions. Things created in the modern age often come to seem superhuman and limitless, and thus inhuman. Creativity has come, he believed, to be dominated by either utilitarianism or by service of the death-urge. Henry Miller believed that great art is outside of all considerations of utility. Even in prehistoric societies art was unified with life — incorporated into the everyday actions of ordinary people.

Miller wrote:

“If I speak of the separation between artist and public, between the hand that creates and the spirit, between the heart that inspires and

the action which follows, it is above all to point out the grave crisis which is upon us. Art, as we have known it for centuries, has ceased to exist. The death-urge that we bathe in each day, this death, which we accept almost without reaction, is it not a consequence of the death of Art? Perhaps this threat was itself the catalyst, which precipitated the birth of a great book, filled with passion and nostalgia, such as Faure's *The History of Art*? The magnificent evocations of the sublime and the eternal, which abound in his writing, are enveloped in a language that is alien to those writers and critics who habitually write on a subject such as Élie Faure undertook. It is not merely a superior form of language he uses, but a use of language that exalts one and awakens...Faure glorifies the aesthetic giants of a past that we are seeing fall to ruins before our very eyes...one more World War and there will remain nothing on earth to remind us of the creative history of mankind!"

Henry Miller noted that in *Dance Over Fire & Water* Élie Faure had written about how often the creation of great works of literature and art were linked to cataclysmic episodes of human history. Like Oswald Spengler, Faure had identified cycles of social, cultural, and economic growth followed by massive destruction — the latter linked to surges of creativity and artistic achievement. So many great American and British writers, for example, emerged in the aftermath of The Great War. So many great books and works of art were linked inextricably to social changes brought about by war — whether Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* or Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, Picasso's *Guernica* or D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Ford Maddox Ford's *Parades End*.

For Henry Miller, to read Élie Faure's writing on art was to be "submerged...by the torrential flow of his unparalleled spirit."

Reading Faure had, to a degree, been responsible during the 1920s for stymieing Miller's attempts to write. Because of the brilliance of his style and mind, and the catholic nature of his vision, Faure intimidated Miller into silence. Even forty years after reading his books for the first time, Henry wrote that the embers of the fire these tomes had kindled in his heart and soul remained burning bright. It had been Faure's contagious enthusiasm, his love of mankind, his religious vision, his insatiable curiosity, and the evident joy he found in life and creativity in all its manifestations that had captured Miller's imagination. Faure included both the good and bad sides of life in his writing. He recognized the essential unity of all creation — and that good and evil are not opposites, as Christianity claims, but rather elements of the same divinity. Like Solzhenitsyn, he knew that the line between good and evil runs through every human heart.

Henry Miller followed Faure in asserting that:

"The true 'I' is indestructible. The role of art, almost like a path of initiation, is to awaken us to this mystery...To an even greater degree than religion, art offers us the key to life — but only to those who actually live it, to those who consecrate their lives to it and are able to understand that they are but humble instruments, whose task and privilege on earth is to reveal the glory and splendor of life itself."

Miller went on to say that:

"By attributing to himself the powers of a god, man is separate from God and, in consequence, from the universe."

This engenders a contradiction, or rather a paradox, in Miller's intellectual frame of reference, because elsewhere he intimates that the artist assumes the power of a god for the good of humanity. His belief is that man creates nothing by himself and that all works of art and literature are divinely inspired. By suffering, the artist approaches, as Charles Péguy noted, closer to God; and represents the divine here on earth. Miller's intellectual world is not the Judeo-Christian one, which is obsessed by contradictions, opposites, and intellectual and theological conflict. Rather, it is the Hindu-Buddhist mind, which sees apparent contradictions as not being contradictions at all, but simply manifestations of different aspects of the same. Thus, contradiction is illusory. Miller believed that most people were left paralyzed by modern civilization — torn between poles of “terror and devotion.” Man finds an unsatisfactory solace or refuge in an obsession with things and temporal problems, constantly manipulated by government and media, in a cycle of constantly changing anxiety — never (particularly in isolationist America) seeing the bigger picture, the universal vision. This evasion leads to paralysis and neurosis, barely suppressed violence, and an overwhelming emptiness and the prevalence of mental illness.

Henry Miller believed that even if civilization as we know it were to perish, it would not be the end — but rather the beginning of something infinitely better. Oswald Spengler and Faure affirmed this idea by their studies of the cyclical nature of world history and the rise and fall of cultures and civilizations:

“It is the end. Or the end of one era among many. It is not THE END. The essential quality of man is indestructible. The spirit, which once breathed upon the waters to give life, will do so again. Man, this embryonic form of a being that knows no beginning and no end, will

make way for Mankind. Man of today, historical man has no reason to exist and will not be the last word. There is no last word unless it is *THE WORD* itself. ‘In the beginning was *THE WORD* and the word was with God, and the word was God.’^{xix} Looking at the vast panorama of man's creations, let us think less about what has been accomplished by the giants of world art that parade through these volumes, and more about the imperishable spirit of which they are but brilliant, but fleeting, harbingers. Everything may be lost, everything may be forgotten, but we must remember that nothing is lost, nothing is ever forgotten: ‘As it was in the beginning, so shall it be in the end.’”

Henry Miller's use of biblical allusions in describing his own ideas on man and civilization might lead one to suspect that his vision was ultimately a Christian one. It was not. Rather, he chose Christian quotes and metaphors to illustrate his ideas because this religion was the cultural background of most of his Anglophone and French readers — and thus readily accessible to them.

The Waters Reglitterized

Henry Miller wrote *The Waters Reglitterized* as a gift for Emil Schnellock. This text was one of series of hand-written books Miller wrote at the villa Seurat in Paris (1937-9) for his friends, usually by hand in printers' dummies, sometimes illustrated by Miller's watercolors or sketches, or even postage stamps from letters he had received. Some have since been published — such as *First Impressions of Greece* (for George Seferis) and *Order & Chaos Chez Hans Reichel* (for Hans Reichel). Miller scholars have never seen others — because they reside in private collections, such as *Conversations with David Edgar*, the book written for its namesake. Others were destroyed, such as that written for Betty Ryan. On March 31st, 1949, Miller wrote that the text composed for Schnellock was “particularly dear to me, because it deals with the ‘watercolor mania.’”

The Waters Reglitterized was written (beginning Wednesday February 22nd 1939) as Henry Miller lay in bed. He had already made firm plans to leave Paris. War was in the offing. Obelisk Press intended to publish *Tropic of Capricorn* the same month; but there was delay due to new censorship laws, which had spooked Jack Kahane, and because of problems with the printer — the book finally appeared in April. Plans had been made to travel, via the south of France (with Anaïs Nin) — then (alone) to Greece, where Miller intended to vacation with Lawrence and Nancy Durrell and their extended family, on the island of Corfu. Earlier that month, Miller had been writing his essay on Balzac's *Séraphita* and helping Anaïs (who was torn between Henry and Gonzalo Moré) proofread *Winter of Artifice*. On February 3rd 1939,

Joaquin Nin, Anaïs' father, collapsed on stage at a recital. He was soon shipped off to Cuba, alone. By the time *The Waters Reglitterized* was begun, Anaïs and Henry were spending much time together, between villa Seurat, where Henry had already packed many of his things, and a hotel at the Porte d'Orléans, which Anaïs had taken for them. “I am extraordinarily happy with Henry now, as I never was before,” she wrote, on February 27th. Henry was in a mystical phase — still hoping (in vain) that Durrell might bankroll a publication of the Balzac essays he had written and which he intended to dedicate to Conrad Moricand. Henry was also busy painting watercolors, which he showed to Anaïs proudly, like a child soliciting praise.

When Henry Miller wrote *The Waters Reglitterized*, he surrounded himself with paintings —

“Nancy's wild Ionian horses, Reichel's ethnological study of wigwams, which is a masterpiece of its genre, his Rosicrucian abstract on glass, the failed tapestry which I rescued from the wastebasket, the girl in the red hat which is the cover of the child's book I gave you — and several of my own recent attempts.”

These included another self-portrait by Miller, one of dozens he attempted over several decades. Anaïs complained that he always painted the same face, no matter what the subject. Henry describes his watercolors as “always voyages of adventure and, whether ‘successful’ or ‘unsuccessful,’ they give me real satisfaction.” He was “never totally disappointed in them, no matter how bad the attempt.” This admission reveals the freedom that Miller found in painting. He did not demand the highest standards of himself, as he did in writing. It was in painting that he was able to put into practice, to the full, his Buddhist acceptance.

Henry Miller began *The Waters Reglitterized* with the memory of a night when he had stood in front of a department store window, on Livingston Street in Brooklyn, and seen a display of paintings by English artist J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851). Turner, considered by many to be England's greatest artist, was known as "the painter of light." It was the Tate Gallery, with its Turner Bequest, that Henry Miller visited upon arriving in London, in February 1930.^{xx} The Turner display in Brooklyn had inspired Miller and his friend Joe O'Regan to go out and buy supplies and commence painting watercolors in earnest. This was not Henry's first foray into painting, which had come in the summer of 1927, when June Mansfield returned from Paris, with stories of her encounters with Ossip Zadkine and other artists. It was the trip she made with Miller's nemesis Jean Kronska (herself a painter), who had abandoned June to travel to Africa with Austrian writer Alfred Perlès. Perlès would later meet Miller and become his boon companion in Paris during the 1930s – Carl in *Quiet Days in Clichy*. June brought Henry a gift of George Grosz's *Ecce Homo* (Berlin Der Malik 1923). Henry Miller's first painting was a copy of the Grosz portrait on the front cover, executed in mid 1927. He had, because of his poverty, begun painting using a set of child's paints. He painted on free wrapping-paper, scrounged from a local butcher:

"That I vividly remember, because of the delight I had in discovering that I could really do something that faintly resembled the original."

In the first year of his painting, Henry Miller tackled all kinds of subjects, including an un-located portrait, from life, of his mother, Louisa, and his sister, Lauretta, in black and white. Miller wrote that the real impulse to paint had perhaps been acquired, unconsciously, at Emil Schnellock's studio, on 50th Street, where he would often

watch him work. It was in this studio that Henry wrote his first book, *Clipped Wings*, begun on Monday March 20th 1922. While he painted, Emil would explain techniques, washes, and the technical details of painting to Henry. Sometimes, Henry would sit in while Emil painted a nude model from life.^{xxi}

During his time at 91 Remsen Street, with June Mansfield, in 1924, after quitting Western Union, Henry Miller had again been immersed in art. Around this time he read Walter Pater's *Renaissance* and interrogated Emil extensively about Italian art — especially Botticelli, Italian Primitives, Giotto, Uccello, and Cimabue. The room at Remsen Street, where Henry first seriously tried to become a professional writer, had its walls peppered with art prints, for inspiration. These included: reproductions of woodcuts from Hiroshige's *The Fifty-five Stations of Tokaido*, works by Hokusai, and others of the *Shunga* and *Ukiyo-e* style, as well as reproductions of Italian art, Van Gogh and Gustav Bauernfeind's "Lament of the Faithful at the Wailing Wall." In *Nexus*, wracked by pain because of his treatment by June, Henry Miller would recall happier times, surrounded by art:

"In some happy time—when? How distant? What planet? —I used to move from wall to wall greeting this one and that, all old friends: Leon Bakst, Whistler, Lovis Corinth, Breughel the Elder, Botticelli, Bosch, Giotto, Cimabue, Piero della Francesca, Grunewald, Holbein, Lucas Cranach, Van Gogh, Utrillo, Gauguin, Piranesi, Utamaro, Hokusai, Hiroshige—and the *Wailing Wall*. Goya too...and Turner. Each one had something precious to impart..."

The walls are bare now. Even if they were crowded with masterpieces, I would recognize nothing.

Darkness has closed in.

Like Balzac, I live with imaginary paintings. Even the frames are imaginary.”

The placement of art works and photos around Henry Miller’s desk, especially on the walls, was a commonplace way of gaining inspiration. Like Proust, his imagination was strikingly tied to sounds, tastes, smells, and visual images. In the writings of Élie Faure and by his meetings with Japanese and Hindu friends as early as 1918, Henry Miller learned of the abundant use of sexuality in Eastern art and the depictions of everyday life that form a cornerstone of those traditions. These influences would carry over extensively into his writing.

When traveling, Henry Miller regularly visited art galleries. In *The Waters Reglitterized*, he tells Emil Schnellock about his recent (1938) trip to London, and the impression created by seeing again works by Paulo Uccello (1397-1475)^{xxii} in The National Gallery — notably “The Battle of San Romano” and “St. George & the Dragon.”

Henry wrote to Emil:

“I studied it (“The Battle of San Romano”) for a long while...it was only this time that I realized how *modern* the picture is. How modern Uccello is! Cezanne is an intellectual boy in comparison...Uccello taught me a great deal. And how, I ask myself, could his followers have failed to learn? What monstrosities of learning and bad taste lie between him and Picasso, let us say. Uccello revealed a *grandeur* and simplicity of the soul. He was eloquent in *deed*, not in mere conception or technique. He went straight from vision to canvas. He did not merely depict a battle scene. He depicted the state of his, Uccello’s, soul at that moment. The canvas is full of soul, of noble

feeling. With this soul-feeling one can paint or dance or sing or build pyramids...Uccello is healthy feeling, a strong, contained, emotion, a balanced universe — the equilibrium established from within, from his relationship with God, and not from the knowledge of the golden rule.”

This passage reveals how Henry Miller could learn valuable lessons from great artists, which he then carried over into his writing and painting techniques. Miller notices immediately the modernity of Uccello, who was obsessed with perspective, and could be seen as a precursor of Cubism. Miller links Uccello and Cézanne, because he believes Cézanne attempted to achieve effects like those created by Uccello, centuries earlier. Miller sees the Italian painter as coming to the discovery of multiplicity of perspective and consideration of what we now call “the time/space continuum” as a natural means of conveying movement and conflict. Cézanne, on the other hand, comes to the technique, centuries later, as an intellectual exercise. Miller identified Uccello’s fascination with nature (like the Japanese, who he so admired) and with spontaneity, the conveyance of feeling, rather than ideas. This flow of feeling creates living works of art, freed of intellectualism and technical conceits. The naturalness and free expression generated creates harmony between the painter’s soul, his paintings, his audience, and the divine spirit. All is in balance and governed by acceptance. Just as Miller’s and Proust’s work spirals and destroys linear narrative, so the paintings of Uccello offer us multiple perspectives and suggestions of a prismatic, multi-layered reality, in which everything is in flux. Henry Miller would carry such lessons over, soon after, into his *Colossus of Maroussi* and *The Rosy Crucifixion*. Uccello affirmed Miller’s love affair with Hindu-inspired Spiral Form. *Tropic of Capricorn*, recently completed, was his greatest work so far. It exemplified the kind of spiraling structure that Miller could now

envisage that he had mastered, and which he had been attempting to perfect for over a decade.

Henry Miller wrote to Emil Schnellock about the differences he noticed between times when he sat down “calmly and undisturbed to do a watercolor” and when “the idea of doing something seems paramount.” Miller noted that children seem to paint with their whole being — “they surrender themselves to what is at hand.” The curse of even the greatest artist was the fight against distraction and ego. This was something Miller would struggle with all his life — he was constantly torn between the desire to read or write, to research and relax, to paint, or to listen to music and visit galleries, to write enormous letters to his friends, help promote the work of others, or to spend time with people, mining them for material or by the demands of the several book projects he was usually working on simultaneously. Miller reveals that he was also concerned by the future reaction of critics and daily preoccupations. Children and the insane, when they paint, paint outside of time and of external concerns. They paint free of burdens, and considerations about the reaction of others and financial need.

Henry Miller envied this freedom. His favorite times to paint were those when he felt totally at peace with himself. During the late 1930s he was not obliged to paint watercolors to earn a living. In the early 1940s painting would become a vital source of income, which pressured him to perform.^{xxiii}

“How wonderful that feeling, as happens sometimes, when coming home about midnight, the place extremely quiet, the light giving just

the right glow about my worktable, my senses keenly alive, yet not so sharp as to push me on to writing (a sort of sifting of the ashes kind of feeling, the fire warm but dying), I sit down by the little pad, determined to do just *one* watercolor in peace and harmony. To paint in this way is always like communing with oneself — and with all the world too. I seem to carry on a personal conversation. The colors talk to me. I cajole them, I implore them. And, in the right mood, I will take infinite pains, for some unknown reason, to mix a little splotch of color, which will fill about an eighth of an inch on the paper.”

Henry Miller’s description of his late-night painting routine at villa Seurat echoes closely that of John Imhoff painting late at night, in Glendale, when Henry was a child. It also emphasizes the spiritual import Miller associated with painting and the peace he found in creating watercolors. The flow of the paints, and the blending of colors, one into the other, gives him the distinct feel that the washes and paints are alive and in communion with his inner being. Henry communes with his own self, but with all creation also — and by implication with the divine spirit. Painting is thus, for Miller, a religious act — at once a crying out for communion and love, and a prayer, an act of communion and completion. In writing, Henry Miller did not feel the same freedom as he did in painting. In prose, he always compared himself to other writers, tried to learn from the greats, and asserted his importance as a literary figure and assaulted the censors, literary establishment, and critics. He was never truly at peace. He worried often about his place in literary history. In painting, Miller was free of all worry about comparisons or his shortcomings. Henry painted to find peace and to create works that were unburdened by doubt. It was in the realm of watercolor that he found himself truly free and suffused with acceptance. Watercolors were Henry Miller’s closest actualization of his Buddhist ideal.

The Angel is My Watermark.

Henry Miller turns, in the “The Angel is my Watermark” chapter from *Black Spring*, squarely towards art, and his own attempts at painting. This chapter contains a description of the genesis of a painting he had completed in Clichy and which, at the time he begins writing, is hanging on the wall in front of him at 4, avenue Anatole France. This provides a unique insight into a day of painting in Miller’s Paris life, as well as one of the most revealing essays on his understanding of creativity and the link between art and religion. Miller first describes two days of restlessness of desperately trying to get the impetus to begin creating something. Henry scans through his notebook, which, as usual, is filled with cryptic lines and ciphers. Some of the notations he no longer understands. He remarks, nonchalantly: “My biographers will take care of them.” He hopes to write, but as he is reading the notes suddenly, coming across references to his mother’s sister Tante Melia, who suffered from mental illness:

“My whole life rushes up in one gush, like a geyser that has just broken through the earth. I am walking home with Tante Melia and suddenly I realize that she is crazy. She is asking me for the moon. ‘Up there!’ she shrieks, ‘*up there!*’”

Miller describes the process he alluded to often in his work: the dictation of *the Voice*, which frequently possessed him when he wrote. It was around ten in the morning when he read this line about Tante Melia.

“From this moment on up until four o’clock this morning I am in the hands of unseen powers. I put the typewriter away and commence to record what is being dictated to me. Pages and pages of notes, and for each incident I am reminded of where to find the context.”

Miller emptied all his folders of notes onto the floor and lay there with a pencil annotating his writing and notes. He felt “exultant.”

The afternoon of this day when his flood of memories began, Miller adjourned to a café, but soon found himself covering the paper tablecloth with yet more notes. He tried to resist the dictation yet could not shake it off. After dinner, late that evening, he was exhausted. Henry tried to open a magazine to take his mind away from work but seeing the words “Goethe and his Demon” he immediately began anew to cram the margins and spaces between the lines with notes and annotations. By midnight, the dictation stopped as suddenly as it came. Still feeling elated, Miller began to clean every inch of his racing bike. Realizing he is hungry, he eats some sausage, with *vin de table* and *baguette*. Henry realizes suddenly that he is too tired to go for a spin. He sits down to look at a pamphlet called *Art and Madness*, which describes the artwork done by inmates at various insane asylums, such as Charenton near Paris (where the Marquis de Sade was incarcerated). At this point, Miller decides he wants to paint. He thinks back to 1927-8 when he had almost decided to try to become an artist instead of a writer. He is unsure how to begin his painting. He thinks of copying one of the illustrations. He feels guilt at the idea of plagiarizing a lunatic! The main thing in painting for Miller, as in writing, is simply to begin *in media res* and to trust his instincts – to make creation a form of adventure and exploration,

submitting to the flow or the automatic process so beloved of the Surrealists.

Henry Miller begins by trying to draw a horse. Not having technical skill, his horse will take on many guises, constantly transforming under the undisciplined flow of his watercolors. Due to slip of the brush, the horse suddenly has a massive cock, which, he notes, could always be a fifth leg (an allusion to Shakespeare's three-legged stool). At times, the horse looks like a kangaroo, because of Miller's attempts to make him prance. Miller is "disgusted with my prowess," but "would rather convert the horse into a dynamo or a grand piano than erase my work completely." He tries to gain inspiration for the form by recalling the only time he was close to horses, when he worked as a ranch hand near Chula Vista, California, in 1913 and used to currycomb jackasses.

As Miller continues painting, his slips of the brush and the flood of color from one space to another, the mingling of washes creates an image that is in constant transformation. The subject transmutes from horse to zebra, from equine to a hammock, via images of horses like those on Ionian vases Miller had recently seen at an exhibition of Ancient Greek artifacts. Realizing he was hitting an *impasse*, Miller turns again to the book on the art of the insane to see if he can derive some inspiration. He can find no images of horses. Almost angrily, he insists: "Human art goes hand in hand with the horse."^{xxiv} He begins to look for a landscape he can copy, to give his Ionian horse a backdrop. Henry, inspired by one of the book illustrations, attempts to copy a castle, a man, trees, mountains, and a volcano. He ends by adding cemetery gates and a symbolic Angel.

His Angel looks sad. Miller suddenly imagines people killing time in a railway station waiting room:

"Do they not sit like fallen Angels...those eternal few minutes in which they are condemned to be alone with themselves – does it not put umbrella ribs in their wings?"

Miller insists that if one wishes to see real Angels, one will not find them in religious art, but rather in the waiting rooms of railway stations, especially the *Salle des pas perdus* at the Gare St. Lazare in Paris, which had so inspired André Breton.

Henry Miller attempts to color in a house and to draw a gondola (inspired by a Renoir he had seen at an exhibit near the Louvre). Miller then shifts time frame in his text. He blends events from 1928 during his life with June, when he was painting extensively, and the events surrounding his departure from New York for Paris in 1930. Continuing with his painting, his use of red gets out of control. Suddenly, the scene looks as if the buildings are all on fire. The scene resembles Nero's (and Petronius') Rome burning to the ground – with a horse in the foreground. The horse has begun to resemble a fire-breathing dragon. Miller then begins to cover the horse with a veneer of color. It is soon blotted out. Miller knows the horse is still there beneath the surface even if it's not obvious to anyone else. Beneath all humanity there lies an animal nature, he asserts, hidden been a social veneer.

"Greece was mad about horses and if they had had the wisdom to remain half horse instead of playing the Titan – well, we might have been spared a great many mythological pains."

Miller reinforces the idea that in the time of Ancient Greece, when man could be seen as a combination of the human, divine and animal, such as under the guise of Pan or a Centaur, that this was the ultimate expression of unity. Dorothy Brett would paint D. H. Lawrence as both Pan and Christ. It was this unity of divine, human, and animal that Miller and Lawrence sought to encourage using symbolism in their writing. They thus advocated that man achieve his human/divine potential whilst admitting his animal nature. One is reminded of Miller's comment in an unpublished letter to Emil Conason, in which he spoke of the characters in his novel *Moloch* as Centaurs – half man, half horse, but also super-human. The implication (derived from Hinduism and religions it has influenced) is that every human being is part animal, part human and part divine. By achieving the unity and harmony of all three aspects of our deepest selves, we can become divine. Miller paints his watercolor instinctively, recalling his manifesto *The New Instinctivism*.^{xxv} He asserts that; "when you are an *instinctive* watercolorist, everything happens according to God's will." Thus, he asserts that all his artistic creation is divinely inspired. Reflecting on the cemetery he included in his painting, Henry recalls cemeteries he has passed. He hates the very notion of cemeteries and mourning. Miller states that he refuses to be buried in one.^{xxvi}

Looking at a picture he has tacked on the wall, torn from a book, he sees

"A scene from the wilds of Ethiopia. The body of Christ crucified lies on the floor covered with smallpox; the bloodthirsty Jews, black, Ethiopian Jews are pounding him with iron quoits."

In Miller's imagination, he links the pockmarks on the body of Christ to another image he recalls from the Bowery, where he saw an advertising poster called "Death to the Bugs." A woman was scratching herself, having been bitten all over by bedbugs. A man is standing over her with a squirt gun, spitting out a chemical to kill the vermin. Miller's mind links this man's "imbecilic" look to that of the persecutors of Christ in the other painting. Miller thinks back to the time that he spent walking through the terrible misery of the Bowery in his youth. He had felt like a nothing – like some Russian or Jewish immigrant on the second floor of an overcrowded tenement, sensing a hostile and alien world on all sides. The experience had been like a pox upon his life. The misery he witnessed and unhappiness he had felt, left wounds in his flesh and psyche that would never heal. He felt almost like a scapegoat. If he had a name at this point in his life, it was *Cimex Lectularius*, the bedbug. He echoes the image of man transformed into insect in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (a play on Gogol's *The Nose*):

"If I had a home, it was a slide trombone. If I had a passion, it was to wash myself clean."^{xxvii}

Miller accords himself a symbolic union with the displaced, the poor and the dispossessed, as Christ would do. The suffering of others was often to become an unbearable burden upon Miller himself, as when he aided his messengers as Western Union. He felt compelled to help them. Miller's position gave him a God-like power over their lives, which caused him untold suffering in turn and crippled his ability to live for himself alone. This led to Miller's adoption of a surface hardness, which others would sometimes (mistakenly) attribute to callousness. Miller would write of this period and allude to his pain in *The Books in My Life*.

Henry Miller proceeded to obliterate the cemetery in his painting. He runs the whole scene under the faucet, scrubbing it with a nailbrush. Looking at the finished result, Miller claims that it is a masterpiece. Others might believe it is an accident, the result of chance. Miller asserts, "Every birth is miraculous – and inspired." His picture is the result of "innumerable mistakes, withdrawals, erasures, hesitation: it is also the result of certitude." Credit could be given for the final effect to all kinds of things: such as the nailbrush or the running water. Yet the attempt to explain and account for the creation of a work of art is doomed to failure, Miller emphasizes, because there is an intangible that cannot be accounted for. This unaccountable element in the equation is the divine impulse or miracle that takes part during every act of creation. It is the link between the artist and the Godhead.

Henry Miller then asks his readers if, when they look at his masterpiece of a painting, they see if the flood of history that preceded it. Behind it all is Siberia (Dostoevsky), the Himalayas (Tibet), Asia (Hinduism and Buddhism/Oriental art) and Ancient Rome (Petronius), the Florida Native American Indians, a fresco from Egypt, the Crusaders, the tomb of Belshazzar, Alexander the Great and the flora and fauna of the sea. He asks if we see the ink upon which the squibs (his future historically insignificant and uncomprehending critics) are feeding. He is afraid we, the readers, may see none of it, but only the surface appearance of a Blue Angel (a joke reference to the Marlène Dietrich movie and the *femme fatale*, like June Mansfield) frozen by the glaciers. He is afraid we do not see what is to him obviously there (in terms of symbol) because we are not trained to see it.^{xxviii} The majority of the public already in the early 1930s needed to have literary and artistic works interpreted to them by scholars, biographers and other "mystagogues," who often

have no clue as to the creator's intent. Henry says the reader doubtless sees an Angel and the horses' ass. He has put in the Angel "to lead you to Heaven." The Angel is there "like a watermark, as a guarantee of your faultless vision." No matter what else Miller could scrub out of the painting, the one image he knows he cannot erase is that of the Angel:

"The Angel I can't scrub out. The Angel is my watermark."

The Angel is the symbol of the messenger of divine wisdom. Miller asserts it is present as an indelible watermark in everything he writes and paints. Miller is himself that Angel. Critics may focus on the "horse's ass" (or the idiot/minor writer) that they take Henry Miller to be, because of their lack of vision and knowledge of non-Christian symbolism and the processes of the divine. Miller asserts that the sign, for him, in the living equation, is infinity. It is the minus (ugly, cruel, suffering) side of life that is most of interest to him, because that is where the need of the divine is most acute. When there is a lack then it can only be righted by a positive. Miller stands ultimately as the equals' sign. He and his work are the summation of the negatives and positives that lead to harmony, balance and to the infinite.

Karl Orend
Meudon

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photographer by the time he wrote this book, he tended to underplay the role of painting, sculpture, and music in Proust's world. Brassai (under the name Halasz) was known mainly as an artist, for his paintings and sculptures, prior to 1930. Oswald Spengler wrote at length on art and color theory (inspired by Goethe's work on painting and color) in his book *The Decline of the West*, one of Miller's primary influences. For the importance of art in Proust's life and work see: Marcel Proust *Écrits sur l'art* Flammarion, Paris 1999, Marcel Proust *On Art & Literature* Carroll & Graf NYC 1997 and Malcolm Bowie *Proust Among the Stars* Columbia U. P. NYC 1998.

^{vi} Marcel Proust *Remembrance of Things Past* translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff Wordsworth Editions, London 2006 p.39. This translation is the one Miller read, rather than later amended and revised translations under the title *In Search of Lost Time*.

^{vii} "The Immorality of Morality" by Henry Miller.

^{viii} For Jean Kronski see "Dear Ghost" by Karl Orend in *Nexus: The International Henry Miller Journal* volume 4 (2007), for Imhoff see "Tony & Joey" in *The Book of Friends* Capra Press 1987.

^{ix} "John Imhoff was the first artist to appear in my life. I can hear my father pronouncing the word 'artist.' He was very proud of his friend John Imhoff. And every time I heard this word a commotion took place inside of me... Tony and Joey were already familiar with the great religious painters and had big heavy books in which the works of these painters were shown. Thus, from an early age I knew such names as Giotto, Cimabue, Fra Angelico and suchlike." Henry Miller *Book of Friends* Capra Press p.38.

^x Henry Miller *To Paint is to Love Again* Cambria Books p.7.

ⁱ Henry Miller did not, in later life, recall accurately when he took up painting or had his exhibition at the Roman Tavern. In his published accounts he dates the exhibit anywhere from 1927 to 1929.

ⁱⁱ Henry Miller *My Life & Times* Playboy Press 1973 p. 82.

ⁱⁱⁱ Karl Orend *Henry Miller's Angelic Clown: Reflections on The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* Alyscamps Press 2007 *passim*.

^{iv} Nin uses artistic images in her writing, most notably in *Collages*, but less so than Miller. Her husband was an artist under the name Ian Hugo.

^v Brassai wrote a book emphasizing the enormous importance of photography in Proust's life and work (Brassai *Proust in the Power of Photography* University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2001). Because the author was primarily known as a

^{xi} In *This is Henry, Henry Miller from Brooklyn*, Miller records that Schnellock being forced to work as a commercial illustrator was “his death and ruination as an artist.... I think his commercial artwork killed him” The example of Schnellock provided an important catalyst for Miller refusing to compromise when he finally decided to be a writer. He refused to hold down a job, even as a salaried journalist, because he felt it would ruin his gift, just as commercial art had ruined Emil’s chance of being a “real” artist. Henry recalled:

“He would say to me, when I first began painting — Henry, if only I could be loose and reckless like that! And he’d try and he’d show me...and it wasn’t at all that way. He knew too much to be reckless, do you see?”

^{xii} Faure was a medical doctor and, given his character, would have probably welcomed Miller. Faure was a friend, admirer, and colleague of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, with whom Miller was most often compared in the 1930s.

^{xiii} “J’ai vu des arbres que ne retrouverait aucun botaniste, des animaux que Cuvier n’a jamais soupçonné et des hommes que vous seul avez pu créer.”: I have seen trees that no botanist could ever find, beasts that Cuvier (George Cuvier 1769-1832: major figure in the history of natural history and science) never imagined and men such as only you could create.”

^{xiv} See Karl Orend *Orchestrating Reality: Notes on Musical Form in the Writings of Anaïs Nin & Henry Miller* Alyscamps Paris 2007 *passim*.

^{xv} For example, see Jeremy Reed *Delirium: An Interpretation of Arthur Rimbaud* City Lights 1994. Miller alludes also to Georg Trakl’s poem of the same name.

^{xvi} Gosse was a favorite subject of Jorge Luis Borges and Bertrand Russell. Miller refers to Greek omphalos stones, named after the Greek word for navel, which were said to allow direct communication with the gods, or divine spirit. The confusion over Miller’s adoption of “omphalos” arises because Gosse echoed Miller in his refutation of the centrality of linear time in human history. Gosse claimed that what we thought was evolution was simply illusion.

^{xvii} Élie Faure *Oeuvres complètes (tome un)* p.7. Decades later, when he was famous, Miller still felt intimidated by the memory of Faure. He wrote that Faure certainly did not, in 1930, need to hear gushing praise from “an unknown, lowly American, who was an ignoramus to boot.” (*Idem*). The quotes by Miller drawn from this source have been translated into English from the French, since the original English text, written by Miller, has not been located.

^{xviii} Although Michael Fraenkel took credit for this development, it began with Faure. Only when Miller interacted with Fraenkel and received his approbation did he finally have the courage, having lost everything, to take the discovery Faure initiated to its natural limits and express his unique writing voice.

^{xix} The Bible *Gospel According to St. John* 1:1.

^{xx} Miller to Schnellock (LTE) April 1st1930: “I think of the marvelous Turners I saw in London galleries.” Miller did not like London but wrote: “I saw some Turners...that alone was worth the trip.”

^{xxi} Miller gives this account in *Sexus*:

“There was one place (the *only* place in New York) that I enjoyed going to, particularly if I were in an exalted mood, and that was my friend Ulric’s studio uptown. Ulric was a lecherous bird; his profession brought him in contact with stripteasers, cockteasers, and all sorts of sexually bedeviled females. More than

any of the glamorous lanky swans who walked into his place to undress, I liked the colored maids whom he seemed to change frequently. To get them to pose for us was not an easy job. It was even more difficult, once we had persuaded them to try it, to get them to drape a leg over an armchair and expose a little salmon-colored meat. Ulric was full of lecherous designs, always thinking up ways to get his end in, as he put it. It was a way of emptying his mind of the slops he was commissioned to paint. (He was paid handsomely to make beautiful cans of soup, or corn on the cob, for the back covers of the magazines.) What he really wanted to do was to make cunts, rich, juicy cunts, that you could plaster over the bathroom wall and so bring about a pleasant, agreeable bowel movement. He would have made them for nothing if some one had kept him in food and pin money.

As I was saying a moment ago, he had an extraordinary flair for dark meat. When he had arranged the model in some outlandish position—bending over to pick up a hairpin, or climbing a ladder to wash a spot off the wall—I would be given a pad and pencil and told off to some advantageous spot where, pretending to draw a human figure (something beyond my powers), I would feast my eyes on the choice anatomical portions offered me whilst covering the paper with birdcages, checkerboards, pineapples and chicken tracks. After a brief rest we would elaborately aid the model to regain her original position. This necessitated some delicate maneuvering, such as lowering or raising the buttocks, lifting one foot a little higher, spreading the legs a little more, and so on.

«I think that's about got it, Lucy», I can hear him say, as he deftly manipulated her into an obscene position. «Can you hold that now, Lucy?»

And Lucy would let out a Niggerish whine signifying that she was all set.

«We won't keep you long, Lucy», he would say, giving me a sly wink. «Observe the longitudinal vagination», he would say to me, employing a high-falutin' jargon which Lucy found impossible to follow with her rabbit ears. Words like vagination had a pleasing, magical tintinnabulation for Lucy's ears. Meeting him in the street I heard her say to him one day— «Any vagination exercises today, Mister Ulric?»

I had more in common with Ulric than with any of my other friends. For me he represented Europe, its softening, civilizing influence. We would talk by the hour of this other world where art had some relation to life, where you could sit quietly in public watching the passing show and think your own thoughts. Would I ever get there? Would it be too late? How would I live? What language would I speak?

When I thought about it realistically it seemed hopeless. Only hardy, adventurous spirits could realize such dreams. Ulric had done it—for a year—by dint of hard sacrifice. For ten years he had done the things he hated to do, in order to make his dream come true. Now the dream was over, and he was back where he had started. Farther back than ever, really, because he would never again be able to adapt, himself to the treadmill. For Ulric it had been a Sabbatical leave: a dream, which turns to gall and wormwood as the years roll by. I could never do as Ulric had done. I could never make a sacrifice of that sort, nor could I be content with a mere vacation however long or short it might be. My policy has always been to burn my bridges behind me. My face is always set toward the future. If I make a mistake, it is fatal. When I am flung back, I fall all the way back—to the very bottom.”

^{xxii} For details on Uccello see Giorgio Vasari *Lives of the Artists* Penguin 1965.

^{xxiii} For example, Miller offered actor Vincent Price several watercolors, and some were rejected as inferior and not paid for.

^{xxiv} The horse is a major symbol in world art, but also in religious symbolism. The white horse is associated with both Christ and the Buddha. These allusions recur in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*.

^{xxv} Reprinted in *Nexus: The International Henry Miller Journal* volume 4, 2007 with my annotations.

^{xxvi} Henry's wish was respected. His ashes were scattered in the sea at Big Sur.

^{xxvii} Miller refers to James Johnson's book *God's Trombones*, in which he likens the fiery orators of African American churches to trombones.

^{xxviii} For example, Miller's reference to the mad Kotchei and his umbrella from *Black Spring* is taken from Stravinsky's *Firebird*.

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